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Theater Troupe To Explore Bias in Faculty Recruiting

By Adam Reger

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What biases do we unconsciously carry with us, and how do these unexamined assumptions affect our choices and actions when recruiting and retaining faculty?

These questions will be at the center of a special, interactive-theater presentation, "Are You Aware? Examining Implicit Bias in Faculty Recruiting," to be shown at 10:30 a.m. Nov. 16 in 112 O'Hara Student Center. The event is sponsored by the Office of the Provost.

"Are You Aware?" will examine how unconscious biases affect decisions made during the faculty hiring process. "Implicit biases" might include assumptions made based on an applicant's name or where that person attended school, or broader assumptions based on the applicant's gender, said Laurie Kirsch, vice provost for faculty affairs, development, and diversity and a professor of business administration in the Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business.

The presentation by Theater Delta, a North Carolina-based theater troupe specializing in performances that promote dialogue and social change, will feature a scene about the hiring of a STEM faculty member. Audience members will have the opportunity to question the characters in the scene, asking about their motivations for the decisions they made. A facilitated discussion will follow.

Offering a mix of scripted and improvised audience-participatory components, Theater Delta seeks to include audience members in its performances, recognizing that when people participate in dialogues, they are more likely to change personal attitudes and behaviors.

At 1 p.m. in the same room, Theater Delta's director, Ben Saypol, will present an interactive theater workshop targeted at instructors, "Can I Be of Any Help? A Destination Diversity Workshop."

The presentations are part of a broader, ongoing University effort to expand and deepen Pitt's commitment to diversity and inclusion.

"The overarching goals are to build awareness and capacity," Kirsch said, helping faculty incorporate inclusion in the classroom and diversity into the curriculum in a meaningful way by redesigning course materials to reflect diverse perspectives.

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While Pitt has had extensive and thoughtful diversity-focused programming in place for the past 20 years, Kirsch said, the University has recently sought to identify ways that this programming can go deeper, pushing faculty and staff to examine issues of diversity and inclusion in more meaningful ways. The effort has been high on the agenda of Pitt Provost and Senior Vice Chancellor Patricia E. Beeson, Kirsch added, and is in line with the University's recently announced strategic plan, which lists diversity and inclusion among its core values.

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That effort began with 2014's "Diversity 2020 Summit," a three-day event dedicated to finding ways to promote diversity awareness across the faculty and in University-wide curricula.

The summit led, during spring 2015, to the Provost's Diversity Institute for Faculty Development, a slate of programming offering faculty the opportunity to develop additional skills to teach effectively in a diverse, multicultural environment.

The institute marked Theater Delta's University of Pittsburgh debut, as the troupe performed "Who Needs This? An Interactive Theatre Performance on Race Relations." That performance centered on race relations and the student experience, addressing racial stereotypes and "self-segregation," among other topics.

Theater Delta's performance received excellent reviews from faculty members in attendance. Kirsch related the comments of a science professor who attended the performance not expecting its lessons to apply to the scientific field, with its emphasis on empirical observations and objective data.

"What that professor came away understanding was that it's not just about the content, but about how students interact with each other in class," Kirsch said. "A lot of times we aren't aware of our biases and how comments that we think are innocuous may actually be offensive."

Those interested in attending "Are You Aware?" may register at <http://tinyurl.com/ormemdf> and at <http://tinyurl.com/o5lerlp> for "Can I Be of Any Help?"



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